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CASUAL SEX DOWN IN UGANDA

Condoms did not play the leading role in reducing Uganda's HIV/AIDS infection rates

by Charles Wendo

What really happened in Uganda that reduced HIV infection rates?

This question received considerable attention during the recent International Conference on AIDS in Africa.

The World Bank monitoring and evaluation specialist, David Wilson, threw delegates off balance with a surprising declaration. Contrary to what most delegates thought, Wilson said his analysis revealed that condoms did not play the leading role in reducing Uganda's HIV infection rates.

"We were a bit over-optimistic and naïve about the level to which universal condom promotion would reduce HIV infection rates in Africa," Wilson said.

"We are now more pessimistic (about condoms) than we were 10 years ago."

Wilson's argument is that southern African countries like Zimbabwe had achieved condom use than Uganda but their HIV prevalence was only going up.

Kenya, Malawi and Zambia had condom rates similar to Uganda, but their HIV prevalence had not declined like Uganda.

Wilson also said, Uganda's HIV prevalence begun (sic) declining in 1992 before condom use became widespread in mid 1990's.

Experts on the behaviour of disease say for HIV prevalence to begin declining in 1992, something must have happened from 1989 to 1991. So, what was it? What makes Uganda different from other countries?

"Uganda differs in terms of casual sex. It is clear Ugandans reported fewer sex partners," he added.

Demographic surveys revealed that in the late 1980's, a growing number of young people abstained from sex while married people became more faithful.

At the same time sexually active people who were not married generally reduced the number of sexual partners. In a nutshell, casual sex reduced.

Wilson agreed that condoms indeed protect individuals from HIV infection if used correctly and consistently. However, in most cases people do not use condoms consistently. This is worse than not using them at all, because a survey in Rakai has revealed that people who use condoms inconsistently are more likely than those who do not use condoms, to become infected with HIV.

Therefore, Wilson said, AIDS control programmes should continue to campaign for abstinence, being faithful as the general message while condom use should be promoted among specific groups such as commercial sex workers and long-distance truck drivers.

Dr. Jesse Kagimba, the presidential advisor on HIV/AIDS, agreed with Wilson.

“The success was due to the hard work started during the late 1980s. By then condoms hadn't come in large numbers. We were depending on messages of fear. There was a change in sexual behaviour because people were scared,” he said.

Kagimba attributes the behaviour change to massive awareness campaigns that aimed at making people know the dangers of HIV/AIDS, as well as the available options. The Government position has been: “abstain, or be faithful but if you can't, then use a condom.

Kagimba also agrees that condom promotion should be targeted to special groups rather than universally. “If you just hand over condoms to school children who do not even know where the sexual organ is, you are creating false confidence,” he said.